

THANKSGIVING

“The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company... a church... a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past... we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude... I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it” (Charles Swindoll).

Powerful words! What Swindoll is saying is that even though we cannot control what happens to us, we are in control of our reactions. We’re responsible for our responses. We own our attitudes. Other people may act in ways we find irritating, annoying, or infuriating, but we own our irritation, annoyance and fury.

Our problem is that because of past painful experiences, we have default settings in our emotional control panels—automatic reactions to circumstances that feel threatening.

For instance, a child who was bullied at school may develop a huge panic button that gets pressed whenever he feels intimidated. We like to blame others for pushing our buttons—like the bullies in our lives—but the sober reality is that we’re the ones hitting the alarms. We feel the threat and our emotional anti-virus kicks in.

Change happens when we begin to take charge of our reactions. We begin to understand our default settings and why they’re there. We challenge reactions that seem perfectly justified and normal and learn to choose more appropriate responses.

That’s what Swindoll means when he says, “The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude...”

Listen to this command from Scripture: “...give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thes. 5:18). Our immediate circumstance is the 10% of what is happening to us. Giving thanks is the 90% response God asks of us.

Tell me, is that reasonable? Does God have the right to *command* thanksgiving? And what goes on in your gut when you hear the Bible say: “...give thanks in all circumstances”?

I feel an immediate push-back. Those sinful parts of me demand to understand why it makes sense for me to be thankful. I want to know that giving thanks will help me cope or bring a blessing. I don’t want to hear that I need to give thanks just because it is right for me as a creature to be grateful to my Creator. I’ll decide whether or not to give thanks in any given circumstance.

There is something very pagan about our resistance—something actively rebellious. In the Book of Romans, when Paul made his case against the sinfulness of humankind, he said this: “For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God *nor gave thanks* to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” (Rom. 1:20-22).

For Paul, at least, a refusal to honor God with the thanksgiving due him was significant evidence of the rebelliousness of people. It is a failure of our most basic human obligation to God, who made all things and sustains all things by his powerful word.

No wonder the New Testament is filled with the expectation that Christ-followers give thanks. For instance:

- “...among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving” (Eph. 5:3-4).

In other words, get rid of the potty mouth and season your speech with gratitude.

- “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6).

In other words, whenever you pray, and whatever you pray about, include thanksgiving.

- “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:6-7).

Listening to verses like these—and these are just a sample—we cannot escape the conclusion that Christ-followers should be the most grateful, thankful people on earth.

Why?

First and foremost, because our God has rescued us from the consequences of our sin, declared us “Not Guilty” in his sight, adopted us as his children, and made us heirs of his eternal kingdom. Christ-followers ought be eternally thankful because God has lavished upon us his mercy and his grace, . Because of Jesus, God doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. Because of Jesus, we are “...joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified [us] to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” (Col. 1:12).

This deep sense of gratitude informs our worship. The writer of Hebrews says: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God *acceptably* with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (Hebrews 12:28-29). In other words, if gratitude is missing from our worship, our worship is missing something essential. “... let us be thankful [that we are receiving an unshakeable kingdom], and so worship God *acceptably* with reverence and awe...”

A failure of deep gratitude for our eternal salvation betrays a divided heart that is pre-occupied with our immediate circumstances and our stuff, and no longer impressed by God's grace. Divided hearts fail miserably at offering God acceptable worship and adoration.

Learn once again to be amazed by grace, and say, “Thanks!”

Second, Christ-followers are among the most grateful people on earth because they are most clearly aware of the goodness of God's creation. Those of you who got to hear Dr. Wittmer last week remember how he camped on this theme. Creation is good: “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving...” (1 Timothy 4:1-4).

Paul says denying the goodness of God's creation and God's provision is demonic. And

that very goodness requires of us that we receive it with thanksgiving.

Indulge me as I climb up on my little soapbox for a moment. When you pray at mealtimes, say thanks. If you pronounce the blessing, bless God who provides us with all good things to enjoy. You can ask God to bless the food and those who prepared it, but biblical example and practice is to bless God with our thanksgiving. So whatever else you say in your prayers before meals, say thanks.

OK, I'm off my soapbox.

Christ-followers also properly thank God for his promises. This is what enables us to be thankful in all circumstances. For instance, in temptation we can thank God that no temptation is so overwhelming that we are powerless to resist it—it's all ordinary. How do we know that? This promise: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

God always has a way out. He promises wisdom and grace. We can thank God for resources that free us, that enable us to escape from the wrong things we really want to do.

Last week Dr. Wittmer talked about focusing on the goodness of God's creation as a means of coping with temptations that come because of the fall. Remember that? He said, for instance, that we can face sexual temptation by affirming God's good purposes for human sexuality within the freedom of marriage. We reject the sin because it belongs to the fall and destroys what God has created to be good.

Add thanksgiving to that mix. Men especially struggle with sensual temptation. Guys, when a fantasy is powerfully seductive, thanksgiving can be an even more powerful reality check. Even when your marriage may be going through some rough spots, be thankful that this woman even puts up with you. Be thankful for the life you've built together. Remember those qualities that attracted you to her to begin with and thank God for her. Thank God for your kids. Thanksgiving can be an effective way out, an escape from the temptations of lust.

Other promises remind us that nothing in all of this created universe can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus. They remind us that God can use any circumstance in our lives to shape something wonderfully Christ-like in us. Thank God that not even Satan can stop God from making us like Jesus and bringing us home to his eternal kingdom.

Our hope inspires gratitude, even through tears of lament and grief at the side of the grave. In the end, death loses. God wins. Life wins. Love wins. Our thanksgiving can be an act of defiance against all that is fallen and wrong in this world, and an affirmation of our absolute confidence in God. That's why Job, having lost everything precious to him, could affirm: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21, NASV). Job gave thanks.

This is Thanksgiving, a holiday set aside collectively to thank God for his blessings. In a time such as ours, in an economy such as ours, with swine flu infecting so many, with intractable wars draining our nations resources and energy, giving thanks can be a tough sell. But not for Christ-followers. "...give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thes. 5:18).

Have you ever thought about taking a thanksgiving inventory? For what in your life are you grateful?

Remember earlier when we talked about our emotional control panels. Do you have a thanksgiving button that you press regularly?

Let me suggest a little exercise. At one of your meals each day this week, say thanks to God for at least three things. Be authentic—identify things for which you are truly grateful. Don't just throw words into the air. If you want, involve the whole family.

Now here's the catch—every time you do this, each day, name three new things. No repeats. At the end of the week, you will have said thanks for twenty-one different things—not so very much when you think about it, but more than you would have otherwise if you didn't think about it.

You'll be doing God's will. You'll be offering God worship he accepts. And you'll be “...playing on the one string you have, and that is your attitude...”